Ryan Padraig Kelly

Hey, Tanner. It’s me again. Just checking in; I’ll try to keep it short.

Was really missing you at our last game. Tony can’t catch for shit. Coach even asked him if he needed glasses, was genuinely worried about his depth perception being off or something. He’s a helluva runner, it’s why we wanted him, but *man* does he fumble hard. Got so frustrated watching him I almost slipped up and said that word again. You know, the one you always told me not to call people.

I, uh, don’t talk like that anymore. In case you were wondering. Made

a decision, back when everything...yeah.

Think I left a lotta stuff behind that day.

...Sorry, uh...allergies, you know how it is. Got me thinking about the first time we met, back in September of fifth grade. I was out front of the school shooting hoops, and you came up and tried to give me this yellow flower. Chrysanthemum. I only know that because you told me what it was called. You said it meant happiness and friendship. I said it meant you were a...I dunno. I don’t think I

knew the word back then, but I probably would’ve said it if I did.

I guess that was pretty much our whole relationship until you joined the team in freshman year, huh?

We were good after that, though. I mean, you were just another one of the guys. We all...I thought of you as a friend, even if I was a hardass to you when I really didn’t have to be. It’s just a game. But it’s kind of more than that, isn’t it? I mean, remember when you caught that pass I threw crooked during the last few seconds of that match against Hamilton West?

It had been raining off and on all day, and the field was so muddy, you couldn’t tell the color of anyone’s shoes. It was a home game, nearly tied, and it all came down to that last play in overtime. Everyone was tired, even the crowd was tired, but they still screamed themselves hoarse for us. Verona MacKenzie was holding that huge sign. I don’t even remember what it said, but I remember seeing that and feeling like we had something to fight for.

But I messed up that last pass. Soon as that ball left my hands, I knew. Could say it was the rain screwing with my grip, but I think I

just got too confident. I remember watching that ball spiral like it was slow-mo, knowing I threw it wrong and it would miss you by a mile. I remember thinking that was it; I lost the game for us.

And then you—you crazy son of a bitch, you ran upfield for my awful pass. It’s like you never doubted me, never doubted my pass, just rolled with it ‘cause we had a game to win. And we did. You caught that awful, screwball pass and ran it back down the field. I saw you dodge Hamilton’s defense; you used the mud to slide right past them like a ghost. Before anyone could even figure out what

happened, you were in the endzone.

That moment, when the crowd started roaring and stamping in the stands, and we all ran down the field to throw our arms around you, I hope you felt what I did. I hope you felt so happy you thought your chest might burst. I hope you felt like a titan, like the king of the whole damn world. I think you did. You were grinning so big, I bet they saw it on Mars.

Yeah. That was a good night.

Couldn’t last, though, could it? No good thing ever does. Guess you’d know that more than anyone.

I don’t remember where I heard the rumor first. Funny how that works, isn’t it? We all just kind of collectively started joking about it. And you laughed along with us—of course you did. You didn’t wanna look too serious about it. It should’ve stopped there. I should have—I should have said something. When people outside of the team picked it up, I should’ve stepped in.

I dream about it, sometimes. That moment in the cafeteria. I think you tapped Henry on the shoulder or something, ‘cause you wanted him to move over. And he yelled at

you, said those things in front of the whole school.

I think he—I don’t think Henry meant to say it so loud. Or— No, that doesn’t really matter, does it?

People started laughing, and—God, you looked scared. Hurt. Angry. You just stood there with your red plastic tray like there was this awful spotlight on you. Your knuckles were so white. I don’t know what was going through your head, but you looked just like you did all those years ago when I knocked that chrysanthemum flower out of your hand.

In my dream, I always get up. I scream at them, the whole crowd. I say, *what the hell is wrong with you all?* Or sometimes I just grab your shoulder, and we leave together. I think once I dreamed that I punched Henry in the mouth and told him to get over himself.

I wish I had done any of those things. I wish I had known, back then. I could have, if I'd just taken a moment to think. But I didn't.

I sat on my ass and laughed at you.

Everything went downhill so fast from there. I wish I had done...anything, really. Talked to

you, stood up for you, asked where your head was at.

I’ve thought a lot about why I didn’t. Think it comes down to one thing, really. It started as a joke, right, and it made people laugh and feel good, and at first I just didn’t wanna ruin it for everyone. And then when things got worse...

I remember seeing your locker, after Adam and Trent went over it with Sharpie. I could have...I don’t know, tracked down a janitor? Scribbled everything over to make it unreadable? Something besides just walking right past like it was all

invisible to me. Like you were invisible to me.

You weren’t. I saw you struggling. You were never the quiet kid; you always had something to say. You were good with people in a way I’ve never been. But suddenly you clammed up, just pulled away from everyone and everything. I remember feeling real bad for you when you stopped coming to practice, but...

I was scared. I thought if I said anything, did anything, they’d all turn on me, too. I couldn’t...

No. That’s not true. I *could* have helped anyways, and I didn’t.

I just remembered—freshman year, one of our first practices with the team. It was sweltering hot, like summer was gonna stick around all season. Coach made us run laps until I felt like I was gonna barf. And then I was all shaky, and I couldn’t lift that tire we use for strength training. The upperclassmen were all making fun of me for it. It hurt, and I didn’t say anything ‘cause I didn’t wanna look even weaker than I already did.

But you jumped right in, told ‘em to knock it off. Think you said something like, *what do you think the word ‘practice’ means, huh? It means we’re here to get better.*

I can’t believe I forgot about that.

You were always braver than the rest of us. If anyone else got targeted like you did, you’d have been there for them. I truly believe that. Which makes it all so much worse that we weren’t there for you.

I said I was gonna keep this short, didn’t I? And here I am, going on about what I should’ve done different. I only meant give you a few updates.

Let’s see, uh...our team trip to Europe was fun, I guess. Did you know that in France, they let kids drink? We all got plastered on

wine. I don’t even like wine, but when in France, right? We ended up back at the hotel and we were all lying on the floor in the dark like we were stargazing or some shit.

It was kind of nice. Just lying there in the dark, head still kinda spinning, still tasting that sourness in the back of my throat. We talked about stuff, the kinds of things you can’t really say to your buddies when it’s still light out. Dreams and where we’re going and stuff.

I think we all kind of felt you, then. Like maybe if we just didn't look, you'd be there with us. Chris started crying; no one had to ask

why. And no one called him out for it, like we mighta done a year back. I put an arm around him. No one called that out, either.

You’re still with us in a lot of ways, I think. Sometimes, it’s this heaviness, this awful weight. Sometimes, there’s this you-shaped gap in a conversation, or we’ll kind of accidentally leave space for you on the bench.

I always think of you, then. And I think—or at least, I like to think you make me braver. I know other people feel that way, too.

Melissa came to senior prom with Verona. They’re dating, maybe

have been for a while. You might've known that already, come to think of it.

They both rocked up together in these gorgeous dresses. Melissa had a dark blue one, and Verona was wearing this kinda sunset-looking number. I'm no artist, but I bet they picked 'em together, made sure the colors popped off. They looked good. Happy. And kind of sad, too, because I know they both miss you something awful.

I told 'em to let me know if anyone gives them shit. Already set a couple of people straight—Adam was being his usual dick self,

asking ‘em snide questions, so I grabbed him by the collar and hauled him outta the room. Told him if he couldn’t keep his mouth shut, I’d shut it for him. He laughed at me, but he didn’t bother Melissa and Verona the rest of the night. Call that a win.

I talked with Mr. Edelman when I went to get my yearbook signed—next year, he’s gonna host a LTB—LGT—a gay rights club. It’s gonna be a different kinda school next year, I think. Wish I could stick around to see it. Wish you could see it, too.

Your mom and dad came to graduation. For Melissa, I think. I don’t know that I’ve ever seen a man break down the way your dad did. I hope I never have to again. When they did the moment of silence, you could hear him trying to hold it together. I remember that minute like it was a year. Like the silence was louder than all the applause put together.

They let me give a speech. I dunno whose bright idea that was, but I felt like I owed it to you, to finally say something. The right thing.

People told me later it was good. Your mom even thanked me for it. I

don’t...I don’t know if I made any difference. But maybe there was someone like you in the audience, someone who doesn’t really fit. Not because they’re wrong or broken, but because the pieces around them are. I don’t think there was a single person on Earth who would have wanted this to happen, but put us together and you start to see all the ugly edges. Does that make sense?

I hope that makes sense. And I hope that wherever you are, you know you mean something. To all of us. Even though we did a piss poor job at showing it when you were still around.

But we'll be better. *I'll* be better. I'm going to university, and I'm gonna learn all the things I need to help kids who're fighting against the odds. I don't have too good a plan yet, don't know if I'll be like a teacher or guidance counselor or what. But I won't let you down again.

Before I go...wanted to give you these. Yellow chrysanthemums, remember? For happiness and friendship.

It's weird, though...the florist guy told me they mean sorrow and remorse. I looked it up online, and you're both right. Isn't it strange

how one flower can mean so many opposite things? And you'd never know just by looking at it.

Got me thinking about all these moments of our lives, when we do stuff, or don't do stuff, without knowing what it really means. One tiny thing could be nothing to me, and everything to you. Sometimes I don't realize it until later. Sometimes I never even know.

But sometimes I feel it, right? Sometimes I get these moments of clarity, like my brain is taking a picture. Like even if everyone else forgets what I do next, I'll remember.

I’ll remember for the rest of my life.